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ABSTRACT

One purpose of this paper is to describe how the concept of statewide minimum standards has been used in other states and to suggest precisely how it should be used in New Jersey. Current New Jersey law requires districts to establish pupil proficiency levels in basic skills, to identify children who fall below them, and to provide those children with remediation services. Statewide pupil proficiency levels would be used to set a floor on those levels. The major purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that the research evidence on mastery learning theory provides ample assurance that the goal of having virtually all normal children achieve mastery over basic skills in communication and computation set at meaningful levels is attainable. Mastery learning strategies require teachers to decide what they want children to learn and then to teach them, to test them to see what they know, and then to help those who do not know by providing time, methods, and materials suitable to the learning style of the particular child. (Author/IRT)

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A Report Of

The New Jersey Education Reform Project
24 Commerce Street
Newark, New Jersey 07102

STATEWIDE MINIMUM COMPETENCIES - A FORCE FOR QUALITY EDUCATION

April 1976

EA 008 759

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I. Introduction

In the Public Education Act of 1975, the New Jersey legislature took the responsibility for further defining the specific meaning of New Jersey's constitutional guarantee of a "thorough and efficient system of free public education" for the state's children. It specified certain overall statewide goals and guidelines and required the State Board of Education to "establish goals and standards which shall be applicable to all public schools in the state."(1) The term "standard" was defined as "The process and stated levels of proficiency used in determining the extent to which goals and objectives are being met."

The State Board of Education responded by developing an Administrative Code which outlined a very specific educational planning process which each district had to follow and included a system for supervision and enforcement of that process by the Commissioner of Education.(2) At the same time it delegated to the local districts the responsibility to determine their own "levels of proficiency", thus violating the legislative intent of the 1975 Act to create proficiency as well as process standards applicable to all public schools. Although the New Jersey Education Reform Project supported the "process approach" emphasized in the Administrative Code, it criticized the failure to also include statewide minimum achievement standards for fear that many districts would set minimum achievement standards which were so low, that children would continue to graduate from those schools without

(1) N.J.S.A. Chapter 212, Article II, Sec. 6 "The State Board, after consultation with the Commissioner and review by the Joint Committee on the Public Schools shall establish goals and standards which shall be applicable to all public schools in the State."

(2) See N.JA.C. 6:8 - 6 & 7

the basic skills necessary to function effectively as workers, citizens and parents. This fear was most pronounced with regard to the state's urban and rural districts which have the highest proportion of underachieving children.

Assembly Bill 1736 is a proposed amendment to the Public Education Act of 1975, which seeks to clarify the legislative intent regarding statewide standards. It amplifies the current language of the Public Education Act regarding "goals and standards applicable to all public schools" to include "statewide levels of pupil proficiency in basic communication and computational skills at appropriate points in their educational careers and reasonably related to those levels of proficiency ultimately necessary to enable individuals to function politically, economically and socially in a democratic society." This amendment in no way alters the process by which local minimum standards are developed. It merely sets a floor below which those standards can not be permitted to fall.

The issue of statewide minimum standards of pupil proficiency has been the subject of increasing debate in New Jersey. Prior to the appearance of A1736, that debate was essentially confined to a handful of individuals in the State Board of Education and the Joint Legislative Committee on the Public Schools. With the passage of A1736 by an overwhelming vote in the Assembly, and subsequent public hearings by the Senate Education Committee, the issue of statewide minimum standards has become front page news and many individuals and institutions have expressed their opinions at the hearings and in the press.

The abundance of heated argument has failed to produce a great deal of light partially because the term "statewide minimum standards" conjures different operational definitions in the minds of the disputants. Therefore, one purpose of this paper is to describe how the concept has been used in other states and to suggest precisely how it should be used in New Jersey. However, more fundamentally, opposition from the educational establishment essentially derives from an inability to accept the view that virtually all normal children are capable of achieving mastery over basic skills in communication and computation set at meaningful levels. The major purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that the research evidence of "mastery learning" theory provides ample assurance that such a goal is readily attainable, and that teachers can learn to successfully apply mastery learning strategies with very little in-service training. Over 100 school districts throughout the nation have already demonstrated the ability to substantially raise children's achievement with programs which are largely based on mastery learning theory and which are rather inexpensive to replicate.

The establishment of statewide minimum standards of pupil proficiency can become a force for quality education if New Jersey's educational leaders accept its fundamental principle that virtually all children can learn, and if teachers are encouraged to study and use the mastery learning strategies which have proven so successful elsewhere. Conversely, failure to initiate statewide minimum standards, is an absolute guarantee that New Jersey's schools will continue to graduate tens of thousands of children who do not possess the

minimum skills necessary to function as adults.

II. Minimum Standards As Defined Operationally In Other States

The term "minimum standards" is defined in a host of different ways throughout the nation. For example, Missouri uses "minimum standards" to refer to class size and teacher and administrator qualifications but not to educational achievement.(3) Some states have developed very broad statements about what children should be able to do by the time they graduate, but leave to local judgement the definition of how well to do them. For example, Rhode Island wants every child to be able to "compute, analyze and evaluate" and has developed 75 specific performance indicators which every child should master to demonstrate competency, including for example, "read a definition of conservatism and liberalism and select from a list those positions which are indicative of each".(4) Oregon was one of the first to develop such a program and now requires all the state's high school graduates to demonstrate competency in personal development, social responsibility and career development.(5) The Rhode Island and Oregon programs have been criticized for being too broad in some respects and too limited in others. On the one hand they include a kitchen sink full of objectives, but there is no effort to prioritize the most critical educational deficiencies. Proponents of local control resent the massive

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(3) Handbook for Classification and Accreditation of Public School Districts in Missouri,1973, Missouri State Department of Education, Jefferson City, Missouri.

(4) Schools and Skills(1976),Rhode Island Department of Education, Providence, Rhode Island.

(5) Oregon Graduation Requirements Administrative Guidelines, (1973) State Department of Education, Salem, Oregon.

imposition of state determined curriculum criteria. Others are concerned that such programs would generate a mountain of state paper work without insuring that every child in the state is achieving at least minimum competency in basic skills.

Some school systems require students to achieve minimum standards in order to be able to obtain a high school diploma. For example, California developed a leaving examination which was intended to permit restless 16 year olds to leave school with a state certificate equivalent to a high school diploma if they can pass a state examination which applies academic skills to the real life problems faced by adults.(6) Arizona, on the other hand, requires every child to demonstrate at least a ninth grade reading competency to get a diploma, but local districts decide what ninth grade competency means.(7)

Effective June, 1979 all New York State high school graduates must pass a ninth grade reading examination to get a diploma.(8) Los Angeles has a similar plan.(9) These plans follow the Denver model which has been in existence for fifteen years, and which has succeeded in reducing the proportion of graduates below minimum standards to from 1-3 per cent in any one year. In all three plans, the intent is to identify

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(6) California High School Proficiency Examinations Information Bulletin, (1975-76), California State Department of Education, Sacramento, California.

(7) Council for Basic Education Bulletin,(March,1975), Council for Basic Education, Washington, D.C., p.5.

(8) David Vidal, "Regents Set Grade 9 Level for High School Graduates", New York Times, (March 27,1976), p.1.

(9) Council for Basic Education Bulletin,(February,1976), Council for Basic Education, Washington, D.C., p.5.

underachieving children several years before graduation, in order that they may have time to undergo intensive remediation in their areas of weakness, so that they can acquire the skills necessary to obtain a diploma. Although the New York, Denver and Los Angeles plans are superior to the Arizona plan, because they emphasize helping the child to acquire the necessary skills, they have been criticized for waiting until ninth or tenth grade, which for many children is far too late. It is far less expensive and far more productive to provide special help to underachieving children in the early grades when their achievement gap is relatively small than to wait until the senior grades when the gap has become huge and many children have either physically or mentally dropped out. Further, many parents and educators are concerned that withholding the diploma of those who cannot pass the leaving examination is an essentially punitive act which punishes those children who have been most severly victimized by the educational system.

III. "Minimum Standards" As Defined Operationally By The New Jersey Education Reform Project

Before the New Jersey Education Reform Project recommended its particular plan for the use of statewide minimum standards, it examined the plans of other states and districts, and consulted with parents, teachers and administrators in New Jersey, in order to develop a plan which best served the particular needs of our state. We rejected the notion of a leaving examination as a prerequisite for a high school diploma because it is essentially punitive. It punishes at the end of the thirteenth year, those children whom the educational system has most dismally failed during those thirteen years, and does nothing to

serve the best interests of the children themselves. We recommended testing at earlier ages and stressed the notion that districts should be required to provide those children who fall below minimum standards with "a program of instructional and other services which is designed to enable the child to achieve at least the minimum standards appropriate to the child's age."(10)

It is our view that the state has the obligation to identify the minimum performance levels in basic skills which are considered absolutely essential for a high school graduate to function as a citizen and worker, and at the same time to encourage districts to provide the broadest possible curriculum alternatives for all children. However, given the desire to maximize local input and minimize state influence upon curriculum content, organizational structure, staffing and instructional methods, it was our view that the use of statewide minimum achievement levels be limited to the basic skills only.

We recommended that the state establish minimum standards for grades 4, 7 and 10 because these are the grades now tested by the New Jersey Education Assessment Program and no additional state expenditures for testing would be necessary. However, research seems to suggest that even earlier diagnosis may be advisable, and local districts could establish their own tests and standards for earlier as well as interim grades, as long as they were consistent with state standards. In such a system, the primary role of the state is to insure that local districts are in fact providing assistance to underachieving children. That is a relatively simple task which focuses the limited resources

(10) "Recommendations Regarding The Proposed Rules on Thorough and Efficient Education", Memorandum of the New Jersey Education Reform Project, (June 25,1975).

of the State Department of Education on the state's most pressing problem. By contrast the Administrative Code in its present form requires a vastly enlarged state bureaucracy and provides no assurance whatsoever that the needs of underachieving children will ever be adequately met.

IV. The Use of Statewide Minimum Standards To Trigger Remediation Services To Underachieving Children Is Not A Substitute For A Thorough And Efficient Education For All Children

Although the New Jersey Education Reform Project has consistently stressed the need for statewide minimum standards, we wish to make it resoundingly clear that in no way do we believe that simply insuring each child basic skills competency is equivalent to providing each child a "thorough and efficient" education. Such a position would run counter to the following views expressed by the New Jersey Supreme Court itself in its decision of January 30, 1976.

> Crucial to the success of the legislative plan, as well as to the argument that the statute is facially constitutional, are three particular sections of the Act: N.J.S.A. 18A:7A-14, 15 and 16. These provisions allocate to the Commissioner of Education and to the State Board of Education a two-fold continuing responsibility: First, to maintain a constant awareness of what elements at any particular time find place in a thorough and efficient system of education, as this concept evolves through the inevitably changing forms that it will take in the years to come; second, to insure that there be ever present, sufficiently competent and dedicated personnel, adequately equipped, to guarantee functional implementation, so that over the years and throughout the state each pupil shall be offered an equal opportunity to receive an education of such excellence as will meet the constitutional standard. (p. 13-14).

Clearly, a "thorough and efficient" system must provide equality of educational opportunity for every child in the state regardless of socioeconomic characteristics or geographic location and must strive to

maximize the potential of each child.

We share the views inherent in the Administrative Code that in the long run, effective educational systems are more likely to result from a process which relies upon local initiative, involvement and support than from state mandates. Nevertheless, we are fearful that the result of exclusive reliance upon that process will be that many districts will establish formally, the informal standards which they now utilize. Where those standards are adequate, there is no problem. But in districts which have consistently graduated high proportions of illiterate children, those local standards should no longer be permitted. The use of statewide minimum standards merely sets a floor below which no district may set its own standards, a floor which insures that each underachieving child will be helped to master at least the minimum competencies necessary to function as an adult. At the same time, districts which successfully carry out the Administrative Code program will undoubtedly go far beyond state standards.

There is a meaningful parallel in the efforts of government to deal with our economic problems. In the long run, severe unemployment and inflation will be solved only by macro-economic policy decisions made at the national level. However, sometimes those decisions (assuming they are the right decisions) take many years before their effect is felt. What would happen to those who are currently out of work if they had to rely exclusively upon the promise of an improved economy several years in the future? The victims of the present recession, at least have the short term assistance of unemployment insurance and welfare.

Similarly, while we encourage the immediate implementation of the Administrative Code process, and share in the hope for its ultimate success, there must also be insurance for those children who right now are at achievement levels far below what is minimally acceptable. Those children need statewide minimum standards now. They cannot place their exclusive reliance upon what might happen in the long run as a result of changes which may occur as a result of effective implementation of the Administrative Code.

V. Mastery Learning Theory and the Establishment of Statewide Minimum Standards

Recent research evidence regarding mastery learning theory provides convincing evidence that virtually all normal children can master at least the skills likely to be defined by the state as minimum competencies. Mastery learning is a philosophy which "asserts that under appropriate instructional conditions virtually all students can and will learn well most of what they are taught".(11) It holds that the ability of a child to master specific educational objectives is a function of the interaction of the child's aptitude for the subject, his perseverance, and the quality of instruction and instructional material. Benjamin Bloom, the foremost mastery learning theoretician and reseacher, argues "that if students were normally distributed with respect to aptitude for some subject and were provided with uniform instruction as to time allowed and quality of instruction, then few of them would attain mastery.... But if each student received differential instruction as to

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(11) James H. Block, "Teachers, Teaching and Mastery Learning," Today's Education, The Journal of the National Education Association, Nov.-Dec., 1973, p.30

time allowed and quality of instruction, then a majority of students, perhaps 95 percent, could be expected to attain mastery...."(12)

This powerful new approach to student learning utterly rejects the prevailing notion of the normal curve of education achievement which assumes that one third will be high achievers, one third average and one third will just get by or fail. The normal curve notion limits the academic goals of students as well as teachers and systematically destroys the self concept of many students who are legally required to attend school for ten to twelve years under frustrating and humiliating conditions. Instead, mastery learning uses procedures whereby each student's learning can be so managed within the context of ordinary group based classroom instruction as to promote his fullest development.

Mastery learning recognizes that children have different learning speeds and styles and encourages the use of a wide variety of alternative methods and materials to meet the individual needs of each child. It manipulates either the learning time each child is allowed or the quality and nature of his instruction through various feedback learning corrective devices, in order to assist each child to acquire mastery over specified performance objectives. This concept is in stark contrast to the teaching learning mode so frequently found in school, where teachers essentially speak to the needs of the average child, where children's experiences are limited to a few texts, with the result that high aptitude children are bored and low aptitude children are constantly defeated and frustrated and rapidly give up and are left behind.

(12) Ibid.,pp 30-31

Mastery learning begins with the teacher's assumption that "most of his students can learn well and that he can teach so that most will learn well."[13] This is a vast leap from the notion that it is normal for some to fail. Ideally, the teacher first defines what material or objectives all children will be expected to learn, and the performance standards which demonstrates mastery. Then the teacher uses diagnostic tests to provide specific feedback about student learning problems. This in turn enables the teacher to select from alternative instructional materials and methods those which are best suited to fit the child's learning style and which focus on the particular problem. Peer tutoring, alternative texts, workbooks, programmed instruction and academic games have all proven successful.[14]

Mastery learning strategy is relatively straightforward. "Objectives are specified, tests for the objectives are prepared, pupils are instructed, diagnostic tests are given, and pupils restudy those objectives that they fail. This study-test-restudy cycle is repeated as needed in an effort to help all pupils achieve the objectives."[15] By contrast, many classrooms are incoherent jumbles of purposeless activity. Requiring teachers to state and measure their educational objectives, will help teachers to evaluate the merit of their teaching methods. If

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(13) Op.cit., "Teachers, Teaching and Mastery Learning", p.31

(14) Ibid. pp 31-32

(15) James R. Okey, "Altering Teacher and Pupil Behaviour with Mastery Teaching", School Science and Mathematics, October,1974, p.530.

pre-test, post test evaluation indicates little or no change in pupil achievement, then the methods used are indefensible, regardless of how enamored the teacher may be with those methods.

According to a study by James R. Okey, teachers can make increased mastery happen, by raising their expectations for pupils and changing some of their teaching practices.(16) Twenty one teachers, with from zero to twenty years experience, with four hours of self-instruction and two hours of classroom instruction, implemented mastery learning methods in a science or mathematics class. Every teacher achieved higher results with those students taught by mastery learning methods, than with the control students taught by conventional methods. Of additional interest, is the fact that a more positive attitude towards testing and diagnostic teaching developed as a result of their experience.

If mastery learning strategies are to replace traditional learning strategies, then teachers must give up their virtually exclusive use of norm-referenced tests and replace them with criterion referenced tests. Whereas the typical achievement tests now used in classrooms (Iowa, CAT, MAT, etc.) are valuable for discerning how one child compares with others, they are of little value for determining whether a child possesses particular skills or competencies. On the other hand, criterion referenced testing, accompanied by feedback and remedial procedures, can help teachers realize mastery learning with their students.(17)

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(16) Ibid. p.530-535

(17) Charles W. Smith, Criterion Referenced Assessment Paper Presented at International Symposium on Educational Testing (The Hague, The Netherlands, July 17,1973)

In approximately forty major studies carried out under actual school conditions, with tens of thousands of students, the results generally have been that 75% to 90% of the students using mastery learning methods have achieved the same high standards as the top 20-25% using conventional methods.(18) Success has been achieved in classrooms where student teacher ratios ranged from 20 to 30 to 1 and even where those ratios approach and exceed 70 to 1.(19) "In general, two to three times as many students who have learned a particular subject by mastery methods have achieved A's, B's or their equivalent as have students who have learned the same subject by more conventional, group based instructional methods."(20)

In a recent research study, 159 undergraduate students in a communications course, using mastery learning methods, scored significantly higher than a control group using conventional methods.(21)

In a major research study conducted in selected English and Algebra courses at five community colleges in California, students who followed mastery learning methods scored significantly higher than control groups who did not.(22)

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(18) Op.Cit. James H. Block, Mastery Learning Theory & Practice, p.3

(19) Op.Cit. James H. Block, "Teachers, Teaching and Mastery Learning," p.34

(20) Ibid.

(21) Ronald E. Basset and Robert J. Kibler, "Effect of Training in the Use of Behavioural Objectives on Student Performance in a Mastery Learning Course in Speech Communication", (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Communications Association New Orleans, Louisiana, April 17-20, 1974)

(22) Stephen M. Sheldon & E.D. Miller, Behavioural Objectives and Mastery Learning Applied to Two Areas of Junior College Instruction, University of California at Los Angeles, HEW Contract No. OEC-9-71-0015(057), 1973.

There is also a growing body of evidence that mastery learning methods have a positive impact on the affective or emotional aspects of student learning, by increasing student confidence in their ability to learn and helping them to enjoy learning. Other evidence indicate that it helps students to learn how to learn.(23)

The successful application of mastery learning strategies is evidenced throughout a series of three manuals disseminated by the New Jersey State Department of Education, which describe educational programs that work. Their primary purpose is to help New Jersey districts to bridge the gap between aspiration and achievement by providing a description of over 100 programs throughout the United States which have been deemed cost effective and successful by the United States Office of Education, with particular emphasis on the acquisition of basic skills. Most of the reading and mathematics programs described in these manuals, are highly structured, diagnostic prescriptive programs which emphasize individualized learning and the use of a wide variety of learning materials.

For example, the "High Intensity Learning System-Reading", demonstrated double the expected reading growth in a study of 2,000 children in grades 3-11 in Omaha Nebraska, at a cost, including training, of approximately $14 per child, per year.(24) Evaluation of Glassboro, New Jersey's reading program for K-3 children demonstrated

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(23) Op.Cit., James H. Block, "Teachers, Teaching and Mastery Learning" p.34

(24) Reading Programs That Work, New Jersey State Education Department Office of Program Development, 1975, p.40

average gains 50 percent above anticipated levels, without any additional costs.[25] The Dale Avenue school in Paterson, New Jersey has a total curriculum which is designed primarily for urban, educationally disadvantaged students. The mean "I.Q." of their students was raised from 82 to 100. These students also score at grade level in reading and mathematics on the Stanford Achievement Test. The program requires no additional cost beyond initial training.[26]

The research evidence is clear. Teachers can learn how to apply mastery learning strategies and accomplish dramatic increases in the proportions of children who master their educational objectives. This fact is of immense importance to New Jersey decision makers charged with the responsibility to establish and implement educational policy under New Jersey's Public Education Act of 1975 and the New Jersey Administrative Code.

Section 6:8-3.8 of the Administrative Code requires each district to establish "reasonable pupil minimum proficiency levels in the basic communication and computational skills". Assembly Bill 1736 would have the state set a floor below which no district would be permitted to establish its own proficiency levels. Those who oppose A1736 argue that meaningful statewide proficiency levels would be beyond the capability of many children and would simply frustrate and humiliate them. That view is completely contradicted, not only by mastery learning research evidence, but by the host of successful programs described in The New Jersey State Education Department's Manuals of "programs that work". Not only could the overwhelming majority of New Jersey's children

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(25) Ibid., p.54

(26) Ibid., p.18

master reasonable statewide minimum standards, but they could master skills now mastered by only 20-25 percent of our children. The methodology is available. What is now necessary is leadership at both state and local levels.

Dennis Carmichael maintains that there are five conditions of readiness which will determine the success or failure of a mastery learning program. These are (1) The desire to change the status quo, (2) a systematic management process, (3) effective leadership, (4) a receptive teaching staff and (5) financial resourcefulness. Further, says Carmichael, successful implementation will take place only when the teaching staff, administration, board, students and patrons work together to (1) assess student learning needs, (2) analyze existing educational goals, objectives, and programs based on needs assessment and problem analysis; (3) implement and monitor revised programs including instructional innovations; and (4) evaluate the outcomes of instructional innovations. To the extent that any one of these elements is weakened, the chances of success will be weakened.(27)

The New Jersey Administrative Code calls for a systematic management process which virtually parallels Carmichael's implementation process recommendations. However, if successful implementation of the Administrative Code and improved educational achievement must rely upon the desire to change the status quo, effective leadership and a receptive teaching staff, New Jersey may be in for serious trouble.

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(27) Dennis Carmichael, "Mastery Learning, Its Administrative Implications" Paper Presented at AERA Annual Meeting - New Orleans, Louisiana, February, 1973.

Although New Jersey's Commissioner of Education has deplored the general low state of education,[28] he has at the same time consistently opposed any state responsibility for requiring local districts to raise their educational aspirations. "Instead of insisting that children have a set minimum level of skills,"he said,"the schools should concentrate on 'rewarding, comforting and consoling' children so they do better, 'hopefully, much better'."[29] This public statement is consistent with an internal policy memorandum of the State Department of Education staff which reads in part as follows.

> Standards or minimum levels of proficiency [should be] established by local districts and schools for program objectives which are reasonable in relation to pupils and school resources. (30)

Clearly, the Commissioner's expressed concern for the many children who need substantial help is contradicted by his determination to permit local districts to set their own pupil proficiency levels, and by his encouragement of districts with many low achieving children and limited resources to continue to set standards which will insure that their current achievement levels will be perpetuated. That is hardly the kind of leadership which will motivate local districts to change the status quo to aspire to higher levels of proficiency for their underachieving children.

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(28) Robert J. Braun "Burke Laments Limbo Status of Remedial Work" Newark Star-Ledger, June 22, 1975

(29) Robert J. Braun "Burke Feels Urban Child Will Always Lag in School", Newark Star-Ledger, April 25, 1976.

(30) "Recommended Procedures Regarding State Monitoring of Local Districts' Minimum Pupil Levels of Proficiency in the Basic Communication and Computational Skills"
Staff Memorandum To Fred G. Burke, etal., November 5, 1975.

Drawing upon the views of the Commissioner, the leadership of the state's largest teachers association has also attacked the notion of statewide minimum pupil proficiency levels, for fear that teachers may be held accountable for the failure of their children to attain those levels. Although mastery learning strategies have been successfully learned and implemented by many teachers, it is not easy. As Dr. Block points out, "Each teacher will have to decide whether the chance to have a clear and consistent positive impact on most of his students' learning is worth the effort and energy that teaching for mastery requires."(31)

Many teachers fear that they do not have the skills to help some or many of their children to acquire the minimum proficiencies likely to be set by the state. Such teachers have a choice. They can either acquire those skills or lower their expectancies. If they wish to acquire those skills they can do so with the knowledge that the application of mastery learning principles has led to success elsewhere and that the New Jersey State Department of Education can provide them with detailed descriptions of successful programs as well as technical assistance and in-service training.

The success stories of mastery learning research and the large numbers of successful programs described in the "programs that work" manuals, provide hope that districts will ultimately realistically

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(31) Op.Cit. James H. Block, "Teachers, Teaching and Mastery Learning", p.36

establish minimum standards at the achievement levels now expected from the state's top 20-25% of its students. But there has to be a beginning, and what we have suggested as a beginning is that no district be permitted to establish mastery levels below the level now expected from approximately the highest 75% of the state's students, certainly a modest enough target. However, the 1975 Act recognizes that the "sufficiency of education is a growing and evolving concept" and we would expect that standard to improve over time. Indeed, Chapter 212 requires updating of goals and standards, at least every 5 years. Nevertheless, we are concerned that a principle be established, which on one hand calls for state encouragement and assistance to districts to develop the broadest possible curriculums and the highest possible achievement levels, but at the same time prohibits any district from setting its standards at levels which make it certain that its children will graduate without the minimum skills necessary to function as adults.

VI. Remediation and Mastery

Assembly Bill #1736 requires each local board of education to "provide remedial programs, to assist all pupils who are not successful in regular school programs, including all pupils not achieving state and local minimums of performance in basic communications and computational skills." If we assume, for the sake of argument, that 20-25% of the state's children would fall below reasonable statewide minimum standards, then in those districts where the proportion of underachieving children is far less than 20% and there exist adequate school resources to provide adequate remedial services, this Act would

probably have very little significance, except in those districts which set very low expectancies for certain children, particularly their poor and minority children. However, in many other districts, particularly those which have limited resources and very high proportions of under-achieving children, there are large numbers of children who do not now receive adequate remedial services. A1736 is primarily directed at these districts.

But what exactly is meant by remedial services? In theory we are essentially describing activities wherein children are provided the additional time and/or materials necessary to enable them to achieve mastery over specified performance objectives.

Barak Rosenshine of the University of Illinois is currently engaged in synthesizing research regarding the components of success in elementary compensatory reading instruction. In correspondence with the New Jersey Education Reform Project, Dr. Rosenshine outlined the following major elements which characterize successful programs: (1) extensive testing, (2) intensive focused instruction, (3) variety of materials on the same skill, (4) use of a small step, highly structured, immediate feedback format, (5) teacher's role primarily that of diagnostician and supervisor, (6) basal readers have a minor role, (7) extensive in-service training in materials and their use. It is no accident that these are the very same elements which characterize mastery learning strategies for general curriculum and which form the basis for most of the successful programs described in the "educational programs that work" manuals.

Unfortunately, we are all too familiar with so called remedial programs which are unsuccessful for the reason that they are not focused on the attainment of specific performance objectives, and are totally divorced from the curriculum of the child's regular classroom. It is less important whether the additional time and material is provided by a teacher or an aide or a peer, but very important that the activity be focused on specific performance objectives, particularly those being worked on in the child's regular class. That is frequently not the case. It is certainly a ludicrous picture to envision 50 or 60 or 70 percent of the children of a class marching off to attend "remedial" programs which are unrelated to the specific performance objectives those children are attempting to master in their regular classes. Of course, what is equally ludicrous is that the class which they leave frequently has no specific performance objectives for the remedial service to help them achieve. Such pointless, purposeless, remedial services are frequently justified by a host of generalized good intentions, but have little effect on learning and are often defended by inane statements that not everything worthwhile is measurable.

Does that mean that remedial services are not of value? Of course not. It means that remedial services are likely to be most valuable when they are part and parcel of a coordinated effort with the regular classroom teacher to master specific performance objectives. Further, mastery learning research evidence makes it clear that the earlier in a child's career that such help is provided, the earlier the child becomes a self sufficient learner, the less remediation is required at later grades and the less resources are necessary to overcome huge educational deficiencies.

The existence of statewide minimum standards not only serves to identify children who need remedial services, it forces those remedial services (Title I or any other) to focus on specific performance objectives. In addition, it must inevitably lead to district self examination and ultimately to the Commissioner's examination not only of unsuccessful remediation programs, but of all programs which consistently result in high proportions of children falling below statewide standards, and the replacement of such programs with programs which have demonstrated success elsewhere.(32) The surest way to perpetuate those programs which have failed, is to permit local districts to evaluate their success against locally developed standards. There is no lack of successful remediation programs to choose from. The "programs that work" manuals contain descriptions of compensatory programs as well as complete programs. For example, the "Cooperative Individualized Reading Project" in Bridgeport, Connecticutt, achieved reading levels which exceeded local and national norms, at a cost of about $69 per pupil per year above regular instructional costs.(33) The "Systematic Approach to Reading Improvement" being used in California for K-8 children is a sequential, step by step system, based on performance objectives with criterion referenced tests. It has resulted in average gains of 1.05 and 1.13 grade equivalents in the two project

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(32) The New Jersey Supreme Court decision of January 30,1976 in Robinson v. Cahill emphasized the authority of the Commissioner under N.J.S.A. 18A:7A - 14,15,16, to direct the correction of local failures and to order specific changes if necessary, including budget increases.

(33) Op.cit., Reading Programs That Work, p.88

years, compared to 0.65 in the pre project year. Cost is about $3 per child.[34] Many other successful remedial programs are also described in the manuals.[35]

The New Jersey State Department of Education, through its Program Development Department and the Educational Improvement Centers can provide interested districts with sample materials and technical assistance to choose and implement those programs which most reflect local district needs. They are not expensive to replicate. What the state must provide, in addition to materials and training, is an incentive for local districts to want to raise their educational achievement levels. The major impediments to the introduction of new successful programs are the inertia of some teachers and administrators who are notoriously slow to initiate change and who tend to defend the status quo regardless of its inadequacy and the failure of state leadership to provide motivation for change. Statewide minimum standards, by exposing the hugh underachievement of many of our children, will provide the incentive for districts to seek "programs that work". Conversely, failure to institute statewide minimum standards makes it certain that New Jersey's schools will continue to graduate tens of thousands of children who do not possess the minimum skills necessary to function as adults.

VII. The Debate Over Statewide Pupil Proficiency Standards

The issue of statewide pupil proficiency standards has been the subject of intense debate in New Jersey for almost two years. Initially confined primarily to dialogue among the members of the

(34) Ibid., p.142

(35) Also see "Math Programs That Work" and "Educational Programs That Work".

State Board of Education and the Joint Legislative Committee on the Public Schools, the subject has come out of the closet as a result of the passage by the New Jersey Assembly of A1736, a bill which calls for the use of such standards to trigger remediation services for underachieving children at all grade levels. Public hearings before the Senate Education Committee and a great deal of press coverage have enlarged the debate to include many New Jersey individuals and institutions.

Support for A1736 has come from leaders in higher education, including several college presidents as well as the Chancellor of Higher Education. It has also come from business, particularly from the New Jersey Manufacturers Association. Strong support for minimum standards has come from minority parent organizations such as the Newark Parents Advisory Council. The New Jersey Association of Black Educators and the New Jersey Alliance of Black Administrators speak for many minority educators who support A1736. The Puerto Rican Congress, as well as Aspira, the major Puerto Rican organization concerned with education issues, have also supported minimum standards. Steve Adubato, a leader of New Jersey's Italian American community has pointed out that the need for minimum standards is as critical for Italian-Americans and other white ethnic groups concentrated in New Jersey's urban centers, as it is for blacks and Puerto Ricans, because the education system has also failed their children. New Jersey's Public Interest Research Group added its voice to those who support minimum standards.

The New Jersey School Boards Association Executive Board has recommended that the NJSBA Assembly adopt a resolution supporting statewide minimum standards which was submitted by its Urban School Boards Committee.

Opposition to A1736 has been limited to the New Jersey Education Association, the major organized teacher association in New Jersey.

The NJEA rejects the notion of statewide standards, in favor of the local standards now required by Section 6:8-3.8 of the New Jersey Administration Code. Local districts are now required by the Code to "establish reasonable pupil minimum proficiency levels in the basic communication and computational skills", assess each child to "identify pupils not meeting minimum proficiency levels" and provide remedial programs to assist "pupils performing below the established minimum levels". Assembly Bill 1736 would set a statewide floor below which local districts could not establish their own minimum proficiency levels. Although the NJEA argues against a statewide floor, in favor of the exclusive right of local districts to determine their standards many of their arguments are in fact arguments against any minimum standards at all, state or local.

For example, they argue that the very act of establishing minimum proficiency levels in the basic skills could lead to minimum competencies becoming maximum expectancies for all children, could overemphasize basic skills and minimize a broader curriculum, and could encourage teachers to teach to the test in order that their children "pass". These arguments apply equally to state or local minimums.

Utilizing minimum proficiency levels solely to trigger remediation programs for underachieving children could not possibly lower the educational aspirations of parents, administrators and teachers for all the other children in a district or reduce the breadth of existing curriculums. But if "teaching to the test" will help those children now below minimum proficiencies, to acquire at least the minimum skills in communication and computation appropriate for their age, why is that bad? The basic skills in communication and computation represent only a small part of a meaningful modern curriculum, but children who do not possess those minimum skills cannot ever acquire the other skills and knowledge available to them in art, music, science, history and similar subjects.

The N.J.E.A. has offered a number of arguments against the use of tests to identify children falling below minimum standards, but those arguments apply equally, whether a district has established minimum standards at or above the state floor. Section 6:8-3.4 of the Administrative Code now requires pupil assessment to include teacher observation, parent input and pupil records as well as state and local tests. The New Jersey Educational Assessment Program, because it is the only test now used by all districts, because it is considered by test experts to be one of the best such tests in the nation, would be the logical state test to be used. The New Jersey Educational Assessment Program is given to children in grades 4, 7 and 10. The state could use the results of this test to audit local districts to make certain that they are providing remediation services to those children who fall below state minimum standards. Local districts could continue to use whatever other tests they are currently using to identify children below minimum

proficiency in grades other than 4, 7 and 10, and could, if they wished, set standards higher than state standards for use with the New Jersey Education Assessment Program. Contrary to NJEA claims, districts would not need to spend one nickle more for tests than they are currently spending.

Actually, the cost per pupil of the New Jersey Education Assessment Program, including development, administration and distribution, is $1.27 per pupil. This compares with an average cost of $2.00 per pupil for the host of commercially prepared tests now used by most districts. Some have maintained that the cost of the New Jersey Education Assessment Program is only the tip of the iceberg because it does not reflect the aiditional cost districts must spend to analyze NJEAP's results. That is true. Most of the commercial tests now used by districts are never analyzed. They are often just filed away or referred to for decisions regarding class assignments. They generally cannot be used for identifying children's weaknesses, because they are not tied in to the districts educational objectives or standards. The NJEAP on the other hand, can be analyzed to identify specific learning deficiences and therefore can be used to help children. That does of course, require teacher time and effort. If districts wished to purchase commercial tests which provide the same information as the NJEAP, it is essential that the cost per pupil would exceed $4.00. If they wished to develop their own tests, the cost per pupil would be even greater.

The N.J.E.A. has sought to give the impression that New Jersey's children are already overwhelmed by too much testing. That may be true. But a very small percentage of current testing is done by the state.

Most tests are selected by the districts themselves, but have very little utility for either identifying or helping underachieving children. The introduction of minimum proficiency levels will necessitate not more tests but better tests, which teachers can use to identify children's needs. Contrary to the N.J.E.A's contentions, the use of such tests will give teachers more, not less, responsibility than they presently exercise, responsibility to identify the specific areas in which children need help and responsibility to select and use those methods and materials which will help them. However, they will no longer have the freedom to decide that an underachieving child is too stupid to learn and thereby track that child into an adulthood of incompetency and failure.

The N.J.E.A. has also argued that the very act of identifying "pupils not meeting minimum proficiency levels" would label such children, give them a sense of failure, cause them to become dropouts. That is equally likely to happen given state or local standards, if a program is designed to help those children and is administered by insensitive teachers or administrators. But those children are labelled failures and are dropping out right now. Those that do graduate frequently do not possess adequate skills to obtain employment. Can the state allow local districts to set minimum proficiency levels which guarantee that this condition will be perpetuated? Opponents of the free lunch program also argued that it would stigmatize children. But many children get their only good meal from that program, under administrative systems which do not separate or humiliate those children. Similarly, fear of program misimplementation cannot be used as a rational to prevent

children from obtaining the remediation services they so desperately need.

There are two areas of concern which can legitimately be ascribed to statewide standards which are not also associated with locally determined standards. One is the question of local control. The other is the question of remediation costs.

The N.J.E.A. expressions of concern for possible erosion of local control lend a note of irony to the debate over statewide minimum standards, particularly when the traditional defender of local control, the NJSBA, has supported the concept of statewide standards. It was not very long ago that the N.J.E.A. fought for and won the passage of the PERC law, which the NJSBA claimed took away from local districts their right to exercise traditional management prerogatives. The N.J.E.A also gave their unqualified support to the new administrative code, despite the fact that it requires every New Jersey school district to undergo a state mandated educational planning process, subject to state evaluation and enforcement. Placing a floor under local minimum pupil proficiencies is trivial by comparison. Is N.J.E.A. opposition to A1736 really due to concern over erosion of local control, or is it really due to the concern that it may adversely affect teachers?

The N.J.E.A. has expressed concern over the cost of implementing the remediation requirements triggered by A1736. Inasmuch as the Administrative Code now requires each district to provide remedial programs for all children falling below locally established standards, the real concern is only with those districts which set their minimums

at the statewide floors, whereas in the absence of A1736, they would have set their minimums at even lower levels. Clearly, that information can never be obtained. But more fundamentally, the issue really is -- shall districts with relatively high proportions of children who fall below statewide minimum proficiency levels, and with limited revenue raising capacity, set lower minimums to conform to their available resources or receive aid from the state? For if all districts had the same proportion of underachieving children and the same revenue raising capacity, it would be equitable for each district to raise its own funds for remediation programs, and the issue would not exist.

Therefore, we must ask some different questions. For example, what are the costs of remediation programs designed to help underachieving children achieve statewide proficiency levels? That question also cannot be answered until first, the statewide proficiency levels are established and second, a body of experience is accumulated which enables us to examine the actual costs of successful programs. Clearly, the one thing we cannot do is to refuse to establish the statewide proficiency levels until we know the cost, for if we do, we will never know the cost and never begin to overcome our problems.

If we do not have statewide standards, nor notions of the cost to achieve them, then how do we begin to attack this circular problem? In the words of Lewis Carrol, "why we begin at the beginning". First we must establish reasonable statewide proficiency levels. Second, we must ask every district to provide underachieving children with remedial programs. The costs of those programs will vary, depending upon the

extent of underachievement, grade levels, the programs selected and local effectiveness. Districts will vary in their ability to finance their programs. For the year 1976-77, the state aid formula calls for 33 million dollars for state approved compensatory education programs. There is no way to determine if that sum is adequate, but it exists and therefore should be allocated in the most equitable fashion. One suggestion is to distribute the funds for use by children eligible but not served by Title I who are below the statewide proficiency levels.

After several years experience we may find that some districts achieved a great deal of success at relatively low costs, while other districts failed to achieve success despite substantial expenditures. Research into such variances will help us to improve the development and implementation of educational programs and reduce their costs. Districts will learn from one another and replace high cost unsuccessful programs with low cost successful programs.

We may even find in time, that it really does not cost a great deal for children to acquire basic skills. We may find that when teachers and administrators are convinced that all children can learn and identify and help underachieving children early in their careers so that they become independent learners at early ages, that the need for remediation programs will become less and less. These are all questions about which we know very little. But we will never know more unless we start.

There are many who believe that the prime motivation behind N.J.E.A. opposition to statewide pupil proficiency levels is their fear

that it will be used as a basis for a system of teacher accountability. In our view, state minimum standards should be used only as a basis for identifying children who need help and not for measuring teacher performance. It should be obvious that a teacher cannot bear the exclusive responsibility for the fact that a certain number of children in her class are below state minimum standards. There might be a host of mitigating circumstances. Our concern is to insure that those children receive the help which they need, not to engage in pointless witch hunts. However, given the history of New Jersey's Assessment Program, it is easy to understand why some teachers fear that the creation of state minimum standards could lead to teachers becoming scapegoats for pupil underachievement. If those standards are used only for comparison of districts, or schools or children, rather than for remediation, there is always the danger of simplistic efforts which seek someone to blame for inadequate results rather than the serious business of seeking solutions. That is why we stress the use of standards to help children, not punish teachers. However, many districts with high proportions of underachieving children do not have the fiscal capacity to provide the remediation services their children need. The result in such districts could be to demand better performance without providing the resources which may be necessary to achieve that performance. That is a legitimate and realistic concern which in the long run can only be answered by a state school aid formula which makes it possible for every district to provide the resources necessary to help all their children meet at least the state's minimum standards. As we gain experience regarding the cost of successful remediation programs,

the state's school aid formula can be adjusted to reflect that experience. But if we defer the notion of statewide pupil proficiency levels until everyone is satisfied that the state school aid formula contains enough dollars to meet the task, we embark on an endless circle, because we have no way to calculate what those dollars should be.

VIII. Summary & Conclusion

The concept of statewide pupil proficiency levels is not unique to New Jersey. It has already been adopted by a number of states and is being actively investigated by many others, although the actual use of this concept varies from place to place. Current New Jersey law requires districts to establish pupil proficiency levels in basic skills, to identify children who fall below them and to provide those children with remediation services. Statewide pupil proficiency levels would be used to set a floor under local levels to insure that no district could set their levels below that which is necessary for an adult to be able to function as an effective worker, citizen, parent and consumer.

In contrast to the normal curve view of education, which assumes that some children must fail, the notion of minimum pupil proficiency levels adopts the view of mastery learning theory which assumes that virtually all children can learn, given the appropriate time, materials and methods. This view is supported by numerous research studies as well as the experience of over 100 programs which have successfully raised the achievement levels of previously failing children.

Mastery learning strategies require teachers to decide what they want children to learn, teach them, test them to see what they know and then help those who do not know, by providing time, methods and materials suitable to the learning style of the particular child. Because it recognizes that each child is unique, mastery learning theory appeals to education humanists. Because it is equally successful with all children, it is appealing to educators in general. Because it is cost-effective, it is appealing to those concerned with maximizing limited educational resources.